

Donald Ross – The Pinehurst/Tufts Connection

This is another chapter on the career of Donald Ross, the man who designed the golf course at Monroe Golf Club. Ross is credited with the design of almost 400 courses.

By 1900, Donald Ross had settled in as head golf professional and golf teacher at the Oakley Golf Club outside of Boston. Arriving from Scotland less than 2 years before, he had redesigned the golf course at Oakley. An outstanding player, an excellent teacher, and a man who could layout a golf course, his growing local reputation was about to go national.

The man responsible was James Tufts, a wealthy businessman from Boston. Seeking another investment and a diversion, Tufts traveled south in 1896, where he came upon the Sandhills of North Carolina. Set in gentle rolling hills, the Sandhills were formed by glacier drift, leaving behind a rich bed of sandy soil. The combination of pleasant winter temperatures and soaring loblolly pines impressed Tufts as the ideal location for a “health resort,” attracting the wealthy from the cold New England winters.

With budgets no obstacle; Tufts hired the firm of Fredrick Olmstead to design the layout and park-like setting of an entirely new town, which he named Pinehurst. The town layout remains largely intact today with individual houses, small guest cottages and large hotels. By 1897, Tufts welcomed guests for the season and that winter he noticed guests playing an improvised game of golf on the village green. They had constructed for themselves a makeshift 6-hole course and were busy entertaining themselves.

Tufts looked at this as a business opportunity and the following summer he built a rudimentary course and a clubhouse just for golfers. The golf was so popular Tufts knew he needed to expand the attraction and decided he needed a golf professional to oversee the building of a “real” course and organize golf for his guests. Back in Boston, Tufts heard his neighbors rave about Donald Ross, the man at Oakley Golf Club who could do anything around a course. Tufts met with Ross and offered him the job. So, after less than 2 years in America, Ross became the first person ever hired to manage a golf resort, something 50 years ahead of the common practice. Ross was dumbstruck over his good fortune but quickly moved to take advantage of it with total commitment. From that first season until he died in Pinehurst in 1948, Ross would remain associated with Pinehurst as a course designer, golf professional and general promoter of the resort.

Ross immediately set to work. He sent money back to Scotland for his brother Alex, who would become his assistant for many years. At Pinehurst, Ross built in the first 2 years a new, full course for guests and another for employees. His work was so popular they built a second course for guests, known simply as Pinehurst #2. Opened in 1902, #2 was an immediate hit and Ross would spend the rest of his career tinkering and tweaking the course, which would host 6 U.S. Opens and PGA Championships, as well as a Ryder Cup.

While Ross was shaping and building Pinehurst, the new resort was to respond in kind to Ross. For it was here that he learned the critical elements of how to design a championship test of golf. He needed to learn all new skills, as varied as a civil engineer's knowledge of irrigation to an agronomist's expertise for growing the right kind of turf. At Pinehurst, the sandy soil made for excellent drainage but the humid summers made it impossible to maintain closely mown grass on the greens. Consequently, as at most southern courses of that day, the greens were made of sand, packed down each night with rollers and oiled to keep them tight. They could not be contoured but instead kept table flat and small in size. Ross wanted large greens with undulations similar to those he had worked on at St. Andrews. So he carefully began a program to learn and experiment with grasses that would stand up to the summer weather and the greens traffic. He was as patient as he was determined, for it took almost 30 years before he was satisfied with the right combination of grass to permanently change out the Pinehurst sand greens.

Next: How that Pinehurst "education" influenced Ross-- and all of golf architecture.

Caption for Ross picture to be sent by mail:

Donald Ross was an outstanding amateur golfer, qualifying for a total of 15 British and US Opens. Here is Ross in a photo taken about 1901, probably one he stopped and posed for in the different positions. Notice the 10-finger baseball grip and the wide stance, both common for that era. Pretty decent turn for a guy in a 4-button suit and a tie.